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The Transformer Verbs: An Analysis of Ergative Constructions in English and Spanish

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Abstract: Verb complementation is a broad topic of grammar since verbs are followed by different elements depending on their semantic and syntactic features (Swan, 2005). For this reason, this paper deals with a specific type of construction: ergative constructions. The aim of the present study is to define and to analyze ergative constructions in English. Additionally, English ergative constructions are compared in general terms to the Spanish version of this type of constructions. Ergative constructions are similar in both languages as English and Spanish are nominative-accusative languages. Nevertheless, they are slightly different in terms of terminology and, in some cases, their intransitive ergative constructions are structured differently since Spanish adds the particle 'se' with some verbs. Furthermore, as *ergativity* is a scarcely known aspect, 28 Spanish students of English were asked to answer different questions concerning transitivity, intransitivity and ergativity. Among the participants, some of them had previous knowledge of the English language (as they are graduate and undergraduate students of an English degree) to achieve a more theoretical approach. However, the survey's outcomes have proved the fact that the participants hardly have knowledge on ergative constructions.

Table of Content

1. Introduction

This present study focuses on ergativity and its aim is to investigate and analyze ergative constructions in English as well as to compare them to Spanish ergative constructions. The selection of this topic was due to personal linguistic interests, especially in verb complementation since it is a complex aspect of the English grammar. Furthermore, some transitive and intransitive alternations are rarely known (such as ergative constructions), which makes their study more attractive. In addition, this paper includes a survey to discover if Spanish students of English know about this specific topic. Moreover, the survey will be useful to know if this type of students were instructed or not in the discussed issue.

Thus, the main research questions for this project are the following ones:

(i) What are ergative verbs?

(ii) How can ergative constructions be defined in English?

(iii) How can ergative constructions be defined in Spanish?

(iv) How are English and Spanish similar and different in terms of ergativity?

(v) Do Spanish students of English know what are ergative verbs are?

2. Literature review

Verb complementation is a broad topic of grammar, because "different verbs can be followed by different kinds of word and structure" (Swan, 2005, p. 597). Swan (2005) points out that this fact is not only due to grammar rules, but it also has to do with meaning: "after a verb like *eat* or *break*, […], it is normal to expect a noun; after *try* or

stop, it is normal to expect a verb" (Swan, 2005, p. 597). In addition, Swan states that it is unavoidable to learn the structures which can follow each verb since there are not simple rules for this issue.

It is nearly impossible to talk about verb complementation without mentioning transitive (1a) and intransitive (1b) verbs, compare:

(1a) She <u>reads</u> <u>a book</u>.

(1b) It <u>rains</u>.

Besides, this paper will deal with ergativity, therefore, it is crucial to establish the difference between transitivity and intransitivity beforehand.

Transitive verbs are "verbs that […] take one or more nominal complements" (Declerck et al., 2006). Those nominal complements can be nouns (2a), pronouns (2b) or noun phrases (2c):

(2a) I <u>saw</u> <u>Tom</u>.

(2b) I <u>saw</u> <u>him</u>.

(2c) I <u>saw</u> <u>your brother.</u>

When the verb takes only one nominal complement, it functions as direct object. However, if it takes two nominal complements, they function as direct and indirect object:

(3a) I <u>bought</u> <u>a pair of boots</u>.

(3b) I <u>bought</u> <u>Harry</u> <u>a pair of boots</u>.

The indirect object in (3b) is a noun phrase. Nonetheless, according to Huddleston & Pullum (2005), most verbs with two objects also admit other constructions different from a noun phrase. Therefore, it can be found two similar sentences having the same meaning but a different syntactic structure, compare:

(3c) I <u>bought</u> <u>Harry</u> <u>a pair of boots</u>

(3d) I <u>bought</u> <u>a pair of boots</u> <u>for Harry</u>.

In (3c) there are not two objects but an object and a complement. The phrase *for Harry* is not a noun phrase, it is a prepositional phrase. Consequently, it is not an object since it misses some object properties discussed by Huddleston & Pullum (2005). Therefore, the prepositional phrase *for Harry* cannot be treated as an indirect object but a complement (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005).

Transitive verbs can also be followed by other optional complements, adjuncts. However, adjuncts must not be mistaken by direct objects, see the examples below:

(4a) I <u>eat</u> <u>every day</u>.

(4b) I <u>eat</u> <u>vegetables</u>.

(4c) I <u>eat</u> <u>vegetables</u> <u>every day</u>.

In (4c), *vegetables* is the direct object whereas *every day* is an adjunct.

In contrast to transitive verbs, intransitive verbs are those verbs which cannot be followed by a direct object and thus they cannot be followed by an indirect object either. Nevertheless, they can be followed by adjuncts:

(5a) He <u>screamed</u>.

(5b) He <u>screamed</u> <u>loudly</u>.

There are different types of transitive verbs depending on their verb complementation. Apart from that, some transitive verbs can perform either as transitive or intransitive verbs. An example of that are the verbs known as ergative verbs.

According to Cambridge Dictionary, ergative is, by definition, an adjective "used to refer to a verb that can be transitive […] or intransitive […], with the object of the transitive verb used as the subject of the intransitive verb." (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

An important number of papers and articles about ergative verbs are related to this type of verbs in languages other than English. Others compare ergative constructions in English with ergative constructions in languages other than Spanish. There are also papers about the acquisition of ergative verbs by students of English with a native language other than Spanish. For this reason, this paper will deal with an analysis of ergative verbs in English and Spanish. Furthermore, this research paper will also involve a shallow investigation about the acquisition of ergative verbs by Spanish students of English.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this paper consisted of reviewing literature about linguistics focused on verb complementation. Moreover, to compare ergative verbs and constructions in English and Spanish, the corpora and grammars consulted are in both languages. Different articles and dissertations dealing with transitivity, intransitivity and ergativity were used to support the ideas developed in the following sections.

In addition, a survey was created for the purpose of examining Spanish students of English's knowledge on verb complementation; therefore, the survey was focused on

ergative constructions. The participants were Spanish native speakers who studied or were studying English as a foreign language. They provided some personal information such as their country of origin, their age, their education level, and their level of proficiency in English. This background information helped divide the participants into different groups. It was essential to include graduate and undergraduate students of an English degree with the aim of achieving a more theoretical approach. However, the rest of participants were crucial to ascertain whether the Spanish students of English acquire knowledge on ergativity in an ordinary context or they acquire it in a superior academic context.

4. Ergative constructions in English

In the literature review, transitive and intransitive verbs are explained in general terms. Nevertheless, this part of the paper deals with ergative constructions in English. In addition, as the term 'ergative' is defined in former sections, this section goes beyond that. It involves syntactic and semantic features of ergative constructions.

According to Dixon (1994), *ergativity* is a grammatical pattern. It has to do with the relation between the subject of an intransitive clause and the object of a transitive clause. An ergative pattern takes place when these two elements are treated in the same way, but differently from the transitive subject.

Dixon states that the familiar languages of Europe do not present this type of grammatical pattern. "It does occur in – […] – about a quarter of the language of the world" (Dixon, 1994, p.2). However, some Indo-European languages arose ergative features (Dixon, 1994). This is the case of the English language as detailed in the next section.

This grammatical phenomenon can occur at different linguistic levels:

Ergative alignment – defined as the formal singling out of the agent (A) of transitive verbs as opposed to the patient (P) of transitive verbs and the single argument of intransitive verbs (S) – can be found at many levels of grammar, both in the marking of grammatical relations and at the syntactic level (within a single clause or in interclausal relations). The former is usually referred to as ''morphological ergativity'', while the latter, along with ergative alignment in terms of constituency and reflexive control, is called ''syntactic ergativity'' (Dixon, 1994, as cited in Authier et al., 2012)

4.1. Syntactic-semantic primitives

For Dixon (1994) there are three universal syntactic-semantic primitives which correspond to the intransitive subject (S), the transitive subject (A) and the transitive object (O). Therefore, the nominative-accusative languages assort S and A. In contrast, ergative-absolutive languages behave in the same way with S and O. Nonetheless, "many languages have some accusative and some ergative characteristics, linking S with A for certain purposes and S with O for other purposes" (Dixon, 1994, p.6), compare for example:

(6a) They **sang**.

(6b) They **sang** <u>a song</u>.

(7a) He **improved** <u>his writing skills</u>.

(7b) <u>His writing skills</u> **improved**.

In (6a) the intransitive subject (S = 'they') is related to (6b) the transitive subject (A = 'they'), whereas in (7a) it is the transitive object (O = 'his writing skills') which is related to (7b) the intransitive subject (S = 'he').

Consequently, the verb 'improve' is an ergative verb in English and the examples of (7) are examples of ergative constructions in English. This is due to the fact that the subject of the intransitive sentence becomes the object in the transitive sentence.

4.2. Semantic types and semantic roles

According to Dixon (1994), the relations mentioned in the previous section (S-A / S-O) are due to a semantic premise along with their connection to the prototypical meaning of the utilized verb. For this reason, Dixon (1994) presents the 'semantic types' which is used to categorize verbs with a shared element in their meaning and similar grammatical properties. Therefore, there are different types of ergative verbs in English (as will be shown) and they are classified into different semantic types (e.g., verbs of cooking). In addition, there are semantic roles associated with semantic types of verbs. For instance, the verbs of the semantic type of giving are associated with the semantic roles of Donor, Gift and Recipient (Dixon, 1994):

(8) Lucy **lent** Peter a pencil.

In this example, the verb is categorized as a verb of the semantic type of giving. Therefore, the semantic roles present in the sentence are Donor, Gift and Recipient. 'Lucy' has the semantic role of Donor while 'Peter' is the Recipient. Then, the semantic role of 'a pencil' is Gift.

As mentioned above, there are different semantic types of ergative verbs; consequently, these verbs have also different semantic roles associated with them, as shown in the following examples:

(9a) Susan **baked** the cake.

(9b) The cake **baked**.

Both examples have the same verb whose semantic type is cooking. However, in (9a) the semantic roles present are Agent ('Susan') and Patient ('the cake'), while in (9b) there is only the semantic role of Patient ('the cake').

4.3. Semantic roles in ergative constructions in English

Since this part of the paper deals with semantic roles and they have been already mentioned yet not defined, their definition is going to be provided straightaway in order to analyze semantic roles in ergative constructions:

A semantic role is the basic idea or information of an encoder in conformity with the action words perform in a given context. It is the actual activity participant carried out in some real/imagined situation, apart from these linguistic encoding of those situation. It is also referred to as the underlying relationship that a patient has with the main verb in a clause. Semantic roles according to Gawron (2013) are roles that participants play in events and situations. They are part of the content of linguistic communication, therefore they are defined in terms of prototypes and the labels we give them are convenient approximations of the semantic roles. (Akanya, J. & Omachonu, C.G., 2019, p. 3)

4.3.1. Semantic role of Agent in ergative constructions

The semantic role of Agent is a key semantic role in ergative constructions. An Agent is "[t]he semantic role borne by an NP which is perceived as the conscious instigator of an action" (Trask, 1996, p.11), such as 'Susan' in (9a), as pointed out previously. Agents are present in the ergative transitive constructions, nevertheless, they do not appear in the ergative intransitive constructions, as shown in (9a) and (9b) respectively. Then, could it

be stated that the latter ergative constructions do not license Agents? According to Heisoon (1994), there is not even an implied Agent in ergative constructions (10a), whereas in other types of construction, such as in middles (10b) or passive constructions (10c), the "Agent is either stated or implied" (Heisoon, 1996, p. 78). However, Heisoon (1996) points out the fact that none of the three structures allow a subject with the semantic role of Agent and only passive constructions allow a transitive Agent introduced by the preposition 'by', compare:

(10a) *The ice melted by the sun. (Heisoon, 1996, p.77)

(10b) *Government officials bribe easily by managers. (Heisoon, 1996, p.77)

(10c) A government official was bribed by a manager. (Heisoon, 1996, p.77)

4.3.2. Semantic role of Patient in ergative constructions

In ergative constructions, as previously discussed, it can be found the semantic role of Patient. Nonetheless, the concept has not been defined yet. A Patient is "The semantic role borne by an NP which expresses the entity undergoing an action" (Trask, 1996, p. 202), such as 'the cake' in (9a) and (9b). This is due to semantic and syntax being related when talking about ergative constructions, as indicated previously. Consequently, since the object of the ergative transitive construction is equivalent to the subject of the ergative intransitive construction, "the semantic role of the intransitive subject is the same as that of the transitive object" (Huddleston & Pullum, 2017, p. 306).

4.4. Ergative constructions vs. middle and passive constructions

Middle and passive constructions have been mentioned earlier. As they have similarities with ergative constructions, it is important to differentiate one from the others.

Before dealing with the three different types of constructions in English, it is essential to know what a labile verb is. According to Trask (1996), a labile verb is "a lexical verb which can be constructed either transitively or intransitively" (Trask, 1996, p. 152). Therefore, ergative verbs fit in with the definition, however, as shown in the *A Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics,* in English there are different types of labile verbs. Therefore, middle and passive constructions include this type of verbs as well as ergative constructions.

4.4.1. Ergative and middle constructions

As mentioned before, labile verbs are used in either ergative or middle constructions. Nevertheless, even though both types of constructions are similar, they are not exactly the same. On one hand, ergative constructions have ergative pairs, that is to say that they have two equivalent sentences, however, one of them is transitive and the other one is intransitive (see example (11 a–b)). On the other hand, middle constructions also have middle pairs (Keyser & Roeper, 1984):

(11a) Someone **bribed** the bureaucrats. (Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 381)

(11b) Bureaucrats **bribe** easily. (Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 381)

Notice that in the example (14b) the verb is complemented by an adverb ('easily'). It is common to find this adverb in middle constructions because "the adverb *easily* […] induces the middle reading fairly reliably. Other adverbs also induce a middle reading by implying an agent, […]" (Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 384).

Furthermore, ergative verbs refer to events and middle verbs do not (Keyser & Roeper, 1984). Consequently, while ergative verbs occur in imperative/vocative constructions such as in (12a), middle verbs cannot (12b) (Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 384).

(12a) **Close**, door! (Ergative) (Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 384)

(12b) ***Translate**, Greek! (Middle) (Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 384)

Moreover, according to Keyser and Roeper (1984), middle constructions cannot be progressive either. Nevertheless, as ergative verbs refer to events, as mentioned above, progressive constructions allow ergative verbs, compare:

(13a) The door **is closing**. (Ergative) (Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 385)

(13b) *The walls **are painting** easily. (Middle) (Adapted from Keyser & Roeper, 1984, p. 385)

4.4.2. Ergative and passive constructions

Before dealing with ergative and passive constructions, it is essential to differentiate between active and passive voice. The term *voice* is defined as "a grammatical category expressing the relationship between, on the one hand, the participant roles of the NP arguments of a verb and, on the other hand, the grammatical relations borne by those same NPs" (Trask, 1996, p. 299), see the following examples:

(14a) My grandparents **built** the house.

(14b) The house **was built** by my grandparents.

The first example (14a) is a sentence in active voice while (14b) is in passive voice. There is a relation between the object of the active sentence and the subject of the passive

sentence. The difference between the active and the passive is the type of subject. On one hand, the subject in (14a) has the semantic role of Agent, which is an active role, hence it is an active sentence; on the other hand, in (14b) the subject has the semantic role of Patient, which is a passive role, thus it is a passive sentence (Huddleston & Pullum, 2017). Consequently, certain similarities between ergative pairs and active/passive pairs have already arisen, compare:

(15a) I **tore** my shirt. (Transitive) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2017, p. 306)

(15b) My shirt **tore.** (Intransitive) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2017, p. 306)

(15c) My shirt **was torn**. (Passive[1]) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2017, p. 306)

Ergative intransitive and passive constructions are resemblant. Nevertheless, what has been already said about ergative intransitive constructions must be considered: they do not include an Agent role among their elements. In contrast, passives license an Agent role although it can only be implicit, as previously mentioned. For this specific reason, Matsuzaki (2001) argues about the fact that ergative intransitive constructions and passive constructions are totally equivalent. Moreover, Matsuzake (2001) also highlights the fact that in order to passivize a sentence in English, the verb must suffer a change in terms of morphology; on the contrary, ergativity constructions do not license that morphological change in English, as shown in the next example:

(16a) The boat **was sunk**. (Matsuzaki, 2001, p. 15)

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[1]In Huddleston & Pullum (2017), this sentence is treated as a copular, however, the authors state that it can also be considered passive as the adjective 'torn' is a derivative form from the verb 'tear'.

(16b) The boat **sank**. (Matsuzaki, 2001, p. 15)

4.5. Ergative verbs in English

There are different types of verbs in English depending on the element complementing them, as described in the literature review. In general terms, all verbs in English can be categorized as transitive or intransitive, however, some of the verbs can be both transitive and intransitive. Ergative verbs are part of the latter type of verbs. Nevertheless, not all verbs that can perform as transitive and intransitive (depending on what elements follow them) are ergative verbs (see examples (4a, b & c)).

There is a subtype of ergative verbs in English: unaccusative verbs. However, according to Fernández Martínez (2017), the main grammarians hardly deal with this subtype of ergative verbs and only some linguists include them into the category of ergative verbs due to syntactic and semantic basis. Nevertheless, as Fernández Martínez (2017) states, unaccusative verbs are intransitive verbs and only have one argument which has the semantic role of Patient, hence they fit in the ergative verbs category. However, in general terms, unaccusative verbs (opposite to other ergative verbs) do not license transitive nor causative constructions, although there are some exceptions since "some verbs of position (e.g. *lean, sit*) may still transitivize and hence causativize" (Fernández Martínez, 2017, p. 9). In addition, there-constructions are rarely possible with the rest of ergative verbs (only some exceptions), whereas they are perfectly possible with unaccusative verbs (Fernández Martínez, 2017). The following example is a sentence with an unaccusative verb:

(17) I **arrived** home yesterday.

As mentioned above, it is not possible to transform this intransitive construction into a transitive one.

Ergative verbs, as Nordquist (2019) states, "tend to communicate a change of state, position, or movement", such as *break* or *crush*:

(18a) Michael **broke** the lamp.

(18b) The lamp **broke**.

(19a) My sister **crushed** my mother's car.

(19b) My mother's car **crashed**.

On the other hand, there is another type of ergative verbs, as mentioned before. Verbs of cooking are also ergative verbs as shown in the examples (9a) and (9b).

In addition, there are certain verbs that can perform as ergative verbs only with a few nouns (British Council, n.d.). The verb *play* is an example of a verb performing as an ergative with specific words (e.g., *music*):

(20a) Shall we **play** some music? (British Council, n.d.)

(20b) Some music **played** in the background. (British Council, n.d.)

Moreover, one of the most important characteristics of ergative verbs is the fact that this type of verbs is related to the process of causativization. For this reason, the process has been mentioned above when talking about unaccusative verbs. Therefore, according to Matsuzaki (2001), the transitive ergative verbs are derived forms of the transitive ergative verbs caused by an added semantic element to the intransitive ergative verb form. This is exemplified below with the verb 'break'.

(21) intransitive break → cause (+ intransitive break) → transitive break

(Matzusaki, 2001, p. 49)

According to Heisoon (1994), due to the fact that ergative constructions normally have a causative interpretation, sentences with a cause can rephrase them (as long as the verb has a [+ causative] intrinsic feature), as shown in the example below.

(22a) The door **opened**. (Heisoon, 1994, p. 80)

(22b) John **caused** the door **to open**. (Heisoon, 1994, p. 80)

In (22a), as earlier described, there is not even an implicit Agent since it is an ergative construction. Contrarily, (22b) has an Agent which is the causer of the action. Therefore, (22b) is equivalent to the ergative transitive version of (22a):

(23) John **opened** the door.

In the following sections, ergative constructions with four types of verbs are going to be analyzed to have a clearer idea of some of the semantic and syntactic characteristics of this type of constructions.

4.5.1. Ergative verb of cooking: Boil

Verbs with the semantic type of cooking are ergative verbs, as pointed out previously. The verb 'boil' is an example of it; therefore, it is going to be analyzed ergative pairs containing this verb.

(24a) Jason **boiled** some potatoes.

(24b) The potatoes **boiled**.

The first construction is transitive while the second is intransitive. Therefore, (24a) has the basic syntactic structure SVO, meanwhile (24b) has the basic syntactic structure SV. Moreover, in (24a) there are two arguments, one of them with the semantic role of Agent ('Jason') and the other one with the semantic role of Patient ('some potatoes'). In contrast, in (24b) there is one single argument with the semantic role of Patient ('the potatoes') and no Agent can be understood since it is an ergative intransitive construction.

4.5.2. Ergative verb of change: Melt

Verbs involving change of state are also another type of ergative verb. Compare the following ergative constructions pair:

(25a) I **melted** the butter. (Heisoon, 1994, p. 76)

(25b) The butter **melted**. (Heisoon, 1994, p. 76)

The basic syntactic structure of these sentences is SVO and SV respectively. The example (25a) is another example of ergative transitive construction as well as (25b) is another example of ergative intransitive construction. Therefore, (25a) includes an element (subject = 'I') whose semantic role is Agent while (25b) does not include any Agent at all. However, both constructions have an element ('the butter') whose semantic role is Patient. Nevertheless, this latter element in (25a) is functioning as the direct object of the sentence, whereas it is functioning as the subject in (25b).

4.5.3. Ergative verb of movement: Shake

As discussed in anterior sections, verbs of movement are also another type of ergative verbs. Therefore, 'shake' is an ergative verb of this type and it can be found in the following examples.

(26a) <u>The wind</u> **shook** <u>the trees</u>. (British Council, n.d.)

(26b) <u>The trees</u> **shook** <u>in the wind</u>. (British Council, n.d.)

These two sentences follow the same patterns as the ergative pairs in the previous sections. However, (26b) has a distinct element from the other examples. This sentence includes a prepositional phrase functioning as an adjunct; thus, its basic syntactic structure is SVA. Notice that this new element is similar to the subject of the ergative transitive construction ('the wind'). Nevertheless, 'the wind' in this case is a complement of a preposition ('in'). In addition, the semantic role of 'the wind' in (26a) is Agent while the semantic role of 'in the wind' in (26b) is Source. As this type of semantic role has not been mentioned before, it is essential to provide its definition. The semantic role of Source is a "semantic role borne by an NP which expresses the start point of motion in an abstract or concrete sense" (Trask, 1996, p. 255).

4.5.4. Ergative verb involving vehicles: Fly

Another type of ergative verbs involves vehicles (e.g., fly).

(27a) <u>I</u>'m learning to **fly** <u>a plane</u>. (British Council, n.d.)

(27b) <u>The plane</u> **flew** <u>at twice the speed of sound</u>. (British Council, n.d.)

These sentences are completely different from the ones given above. They are still transitive (27a) and intransitive (27b), nonetheless, their basic syntactic structures are SVO and SVA respectively. In addition, the main verb in (27a) is not the ergative verb but 'learn'. In this case, 'fly' is a plain form in a non-finite *to*-infinitival clause functioning as an internal complement of the verb 'learn' (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). The subject in this example (27a) is the pronoun 'I' whose semantic role is Agent. In

contrast, 'the plane' has the semantic role of Patient. Additionally, 'the plane' has the

same semantic role (Patient) in (27b), nevertheless, there is no Agent in this construction.

Besides, the main verb in this case is 'fly'. Moreover, 'at twice the speed of sound' is in

(27b) an adjunct.

5. Ergative constructions in Spanish

The Spanish language is part of the Romance languages; therefore, it is a nominative-

accusative language (as well as the English language, in spite of the fact that English is

not a Romance language). Consequently, in the Spanish language, *ergativity* is connected

to transitivity and intransitivity. Moreover, the subject (or Agent) of a transitive

construction is differentiated from the subject (or Actor) of an intransitive construction,

whereas the latter coincides in its morphological form with the direct object (or Patient)

of the transitive construction (Núñez, 2012). This theory is exemplified below.

(28)   A ≠ [S = Od]

   S, VT [= A] ≠, VI [= Od VT]

(adapted from Núñez, 2012, p 97)

Therefore, a transitive construction can have an equivalent intransitive construction as

shown in the examples below.

(29a) L̲o̲l̲a̲ **rompió** el jarrón.

(29b) E̲l̲ ̲j̲a̲r̲r̲ó̲n̲ **se rompió**.

The direct object in (29a) becomes the subject in (29b) and, in both cases, performs the

semantic role of Patient. However, there is one single argument in (29b), thus it can only

contain one semantic role. In contrast, (29a) has one more argument ('Lola') whose semantic role is Agent.

5.1. Semantic and syntactic features

According to Mendikoetxea (1999), intransitive verbs can be divided into unergative and unaccusative verbs. Unergative verbs are agentive (their argument has the semantic role of Agents), while unaccusative verbs are non-agentive (they do not license Agents). Both types of intransitive verbs contain only one argument. Nevertheless, they can be differentiated since they present different semantic relationships between their argument and the verb. Therefore, the argument in an unergative construction is the 'doer' of the action, whereas the argument in an unaccusative construction is affected by the action rather than by the 'doer' of the action. As both constructions are intransitive, the syntactic function of their arguments is 'subject'. Nonetheless, the subject of the unergative construction performs the semantic role of Agent, while the subject of the unaccusative construction performs the semantic role of Patient (Mendikoetxea, 1999). Compare the following examples, (30a) is an unergative construction and (30b) is an unaccusative construction.

      (30a) <u>Marta</u> **sonrió**.

      (30b) <u>La planta</u> **floreció**.

Mendikoetxea (1999) distinguishes two semantic categories of unaccusative verbs: change of state or location (e.g., romper(se)) and existence or appearance (e.g., llegar). The difference between these two categories is that the argument of the former verbs is affected by the action, meanwhile the argument of the latter verbs is not affected by the action.

Additionally, verbs like 'romper' are also called pronominal verbs when they are used in their accusative form with the particle 'se' (Mendikoetxea, 1999). Therefore, the pronominal form of the verb is 'romperse'. Even though some unaccusative verbs are also pronominal verbs (as shown in (30b)), not all of them belong to this category (as shown in (30a)) (Mendikoetxea, 1999).

Moreover, Mendikoetxea points out that unaccusative verbs expressing change of state or location are verbs that indicate causality. There are two type of causes expressed by this type of verbs: internal and external cause.

(31a) <u>La puerta</u> **se abrió**.

(31b) <u>El jardín</u> **floreció**.

In (31a) there is an external cause indicated by the verb, even though it is not expressed, as it has a transitive version (32) containing an Agent ('causer' of the action). On the other hand, the cause indicated by the verb is internal as the process takes place because of the innate properties of the subject (Mendikoetxea, 1999).

(32) Laura abrió la puerta.

5.2. Unaccusative vs. passive constructions

Unaccusative and passive constructions in Spanish have similarities. For this reason, they are sometimes considered to be parallel structures. The subjects of both constructions perform the role of Patient, as shown in the examples below (Mendikoetxea, 1999).

(33a) <u>Juan</u> **cerró** <u>las puertas</u>. (Mendikoetxea, 1999, p. 1585)

(33b) <u>Las puertas</u> **se cerraron**. (Mendikoetxea, 1999, p. 1585)

(33c) <u>Las puertas</u> **han sido cerradas**. (Mendikoetxea, 1999, p. 1585)

The examples (33b) and (33c) are unaccusative and passive constructions respectively, while (33a) is a transitive construction. The subject of the former construction is Patient, whereas the subject of the latter is Agent. Therefore, (33b) and (33c) are practically the same in terms of meaning.

However, Mendikoetxea (1999) declares that unaccusative constructions contain spontaneous actions which are non-agentive and do not present an external cause. In addition, when an unaccusative construction has the particle 'se', it licenses adjuncts such as "por sí solo/a' (34a). On the contrary, passive constructions imply an Agent or a cause, which might be implicit or expressed by a prepositional phrase introduced by 'por'. Additionally, this type of construction (unlike unaccusatives) does not allow adjuncts denoting a spontaneous action (34b) (Mendikoetxea, 1999).

(34a) <u>Las puertas</u> **se cerraron** <u>ellas solas</u>. (Adapted from Mendikoetxea, 1999, p. 1587)

(34b) <u>Las puertas</u> **fueron cerradas** <u>por el portero</u>. (Adapted from Mendikoetxea, 1999, p. 1587)

Moreover, Mendikoetxea (1999) mentions that unaccusative and passive constructions containing the particle 'se' have no formal distinction which makes these types of construction ambiguous. Sentences such as (35) can be interpreted as unaccusative or passive. If it is considered to be the former type of construction, it has no agent nor external cause. Nevertheless, if it is considered to be the latter type of construction, it has an implicit Agent or an external cause (Mendikoetxea, 1999).

(35) **Se hundió** <u>el barco</u>, (Adapted from Mendikoetxea, 1999, p. 1587)

6. Contrast of ergative constructions in English and Spanish

Ergative constructions in English and Spanish have been explained so far. Therefore, at this point, this type of constructions in both languages is going to be compared in general terms.

The first notorious difference between both languages is the name of the constructions. While the English language deals with ergative constructions, the Spanish language deals with unaccusative constructions. However, ergative verbs include a subtype of unaccusative verbs in English.

As discussed in previous sections, English and Spanish are nominative-accusative languages. Consequently, both languages treat the subject of an intransitive clause as the object of a transitive clause and differentiate the former element from the subject of the transitive clause. Therefore, both languages have ergative pairs (36a-b); that is to say, that they have equivalent sentences, one of them being transitive and the other one being intransitive.

(36a) English: <u>John</u> **opened** <u>the door</u>.

Spanish: <u>Juan</u> **abrió** <u>la puerta</u>. (Adapted from Yang, 2019, p. 110)

(36b) English: <u>The door</u> **opened**.

Spanish: <u>La puerta</u> **se abrió**. (Adapted from Yang, 2019, p. 110)

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the fact that the Spanish version of (36b) contains an additional element towards the English version: 'se'. This is due to the fact

that some unaccusative (or ergative) verbs in Spanish are also pronominal verbs in Spanish.

'John' and 'Juan' have the same syntactic and semantic functions (subject and Agent) as well as 'the door' and 'la puerta', which in both cases (36a-b) perform as Patient. However, in (36a) their syntactic function is direct object, while in (36b) they function as the subject of the sentence.

All the sentences have a causation meaning. Nonetheless, (36a) is an agentive sentence with an external cause ('John' & 'Juan'), whereas (36b) is a non-agentive sentence that has not even an implicit cause.

In addition, both English and Spanish have constructions which might be considered equivalent to intransitive ergative/unaccusative constructions, such as passives. However, there are some differences. In the case of passives, they license Agents implicitly or expressed by a prepositional phrase in both languages, meanwhile intransitive ergative/unaccusative constructions do not license even an implicit Agent.

7. Spanish/Catalan students of English knowledge about ergative constructions

In order to discover the level of knowledge about ergative constructions that Spanish/Catalan students of English have about ergative constructions, I created and distributed a survey. The survey focuses on transitivity and intransitivity, specifically on ergative constructions in English. As a background questionnaire, the participants answered different questions about themselves as well as questions about transitivity and intransitivity. Moreover, they provided some definitions and examples to support their answer to some of the questions.

The survey features a total of 28 participants. They are between 18 to more than 60 years old. Most of them are between 18 and 30 years old. Nearly all the participants live in a place with a bilingual context since they are from different places in Catalonia (most of them from Tarragona). Only 14.4 % of the participants live out of Catalonia. Therefore, 32.1% of the participants have Catalan as their native language, while the rest have Spanish as their first language.

In addition, more than 50% of the participants have an intermediate and upper-intermediate level of proficiency in English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The chart below shows the rest of the participants' level of proficiency in English. However, it is important to highlight the fact that graduate and undergraduate students with an English degree have their own category as they should be treated as experts of the English language.
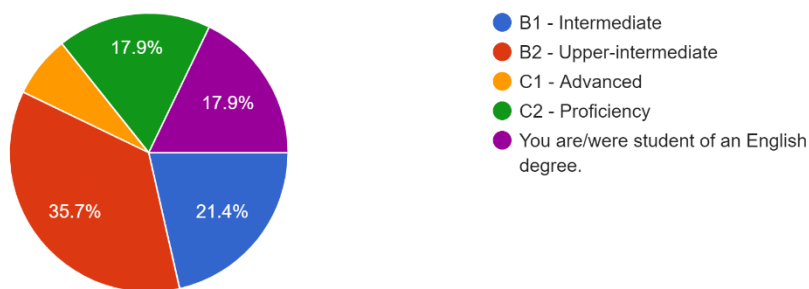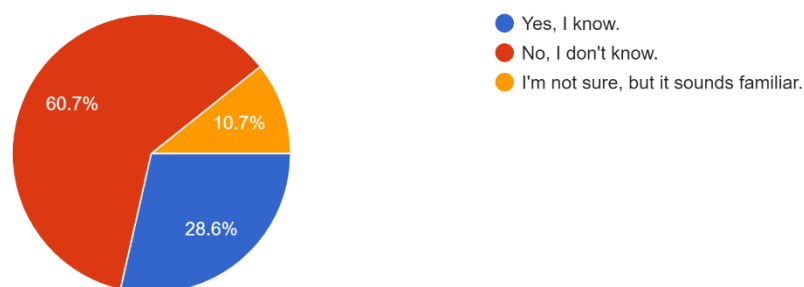

Figure 1: Percentages of the answers to question number four from the survey.

Only five participants are studying or have an English degree. The rest of the participants have different educational backgrounds. There are participants who are high school

students (six), undergraduate degree students (two), teachers (six), psychologists (three), social workers (two), veterinarians (one), historians (one), wedding planners (one), and lawyers (one).

After asking them questions to have a general idea about their background, they were asked about what transitive, intransitive and ergative verbs are. The majority of the participants (78.6%) know what transitive and intransitive verbs are; 17.9% are not sure but the terms sound familiar to them; and only 3.6% of the participants do not know the answer to the questions. Nevertheless, when asking about ergative verbs, the percentages change as shown in the chart below.

Do you know what an ergative verb is?
28 responses

- Yes, I know.
- No, I don't know.
- I'm not sure, but it sounds familiar.

60.7%
10.7%
28.6%

Figure 2: Percentages of the answers to question number eight from the survey.

In this case, 17 of the participants do not know what an ergative verb is and three of them are not sure. In contrast, eight of the participants know the answer to the question. These participants were asked to provide a definition or an example of an ergative verb. However, only six of these participants followed the instructions. In addition, it is important to underline the fact that only two of them provided the definition and an example of an ergative verb. All of them agree on the fact that an ergative verb is a verb

that can be both transitive and intransitive. Furthermore, it is interesting how the three participants who gave an example of an ergative verb used the verb 'open' in their examples.

Moreover, the participants were asked if they have ever had an English or Spanish lesson dealing with these concepts (transitive, intransitive and ergative verbs). Only one participant's answer is negative. Nonetheless, there is a great number of participants who are not sure about these concepts. In contrast, eight participants affirm that they have had English lessons on these types of verbs, whereas nine of the participants affirm that they have had Spanish lessons on transitive, intransitive and ergative verbs. Additionally, 12 of the participants affirm that they have had lesson only about transitive and intransitive verbs in English. In contrast, seven of the participants make the same statement with the Spanish language.

Apart from these theoretical questions, the participants were provided with some sentences in English, and they were asked to answer several questions about them. They are two pairs of sentences. One pair contains the verb 'open' and the other one contains the verb 'read'. However, we are only going to analyze the answers regarding the former sentences since the focus is on the ergative verbs. They are asked whether the sentences shown in the graphics are transitive or intransitive.

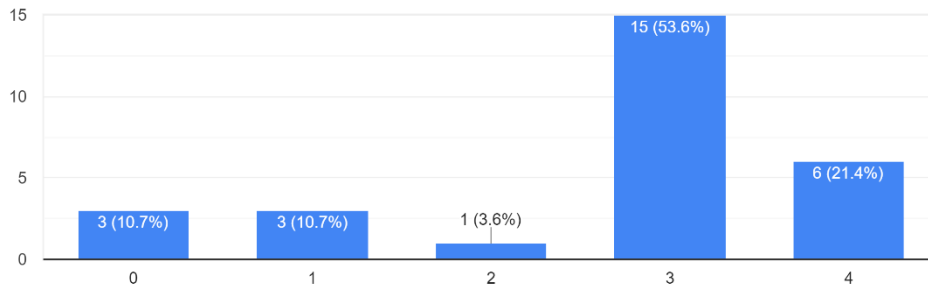"James opened the door", this sentence is ...
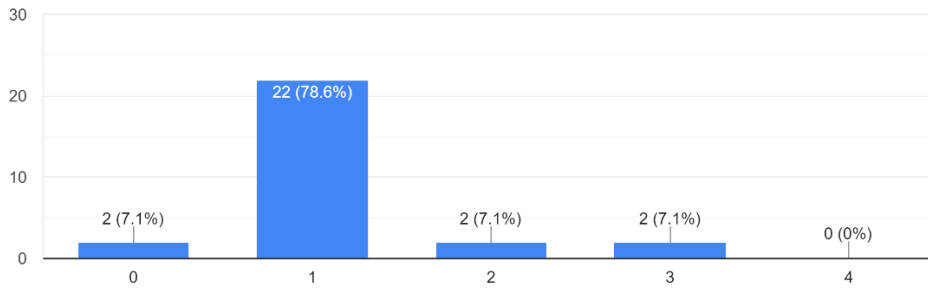
28 responses

Figure 3: 0: I don't know 1: transitive 2: somewhat transitive 3 intransitive 4: somewhat intransitive

"The door opened", this sentence is ...

28 responses

Figure 4: 0: I don't know 1: transitive 2: somewhat transitive 3 intransitive 4: somewhat intransitive

Therefore, 22 of the 28 participants agree on the fact that the first sentence (figure 3) is transitive, while two of the participants disagree. Additionally, 15 of the participants agree on the fact that the second sentence (figure 4) is intransitive, whereas only one person disagrees this time. Consequently, according to the explanations given in earlier sections, the majority of the participants were right.

When the participants were asked about functions, most of the time they mention the right function. However, only one participant answers the specific question of the type of subject of the sentences given. This participant points out that the subject in (figure 3) is an Agent and the subject in (figure 4) is a Patient. Taking into account what has been said in previous sections, this participant is right since 'James' in (figure 3) is the 'causer' of the action and 'the door' in (figure 4) is the element affected by the action. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized the fact that in (figure 3), 'the door' also performs the role of Patient.

Apart from ergative constructions in English, this paper also deals with ergative constructions, in other words, unaccusative constructions in Spanish. For this reason, the participants are asked to translate the sentences 'James opened the door' and 'The door opened' into Spanish (considering that the verb 'open' works similarly in both languages. The participants' translations for 'James opened the door' are uniform; they translated the sentence as 'James abrió la puerta'. For the sentence 'The door opened' most of the answers are also the same (La puerta se abrió); however, two of the participants provide a different answer. They translate the sentence as 'La puerta está abierta'. Even though they use the wrong tense in the verb, the fact that they use a passive construction is interesting. As previously mentioned, ergative intransitive constructions and passive constructions are similar. In both constructions, the subject performs the semantic role of Patient. Therefore, the participants' mistakes in terms of constructions are in some way justified.

Moreover, the participants are asked which type of verb is 'open'. Only 3.6% think that 'open' is both a transitive and an intransitive verb. The same percentage of people (35.7) state that it is either an ergative or a transitive verb. In contrast, 7.1% consider 'open' to

be an intransitive verb. However, 17.9 % of the participants do not know the answer to the question. Considering the theory discussed in earlier sections, those participants who pointed out that 'open' was either an ergative or a transitive verb give the most accurate answers. As previously explained, an ergative verb is a verb that works transitively and intransitively, being the object of the transitive construction the subject of the intransitive construction. Therefore, according to the definition both answers are right since ergative verbs can perform as transitive and intransitive.

Further to this, the participants are asked whether the Spanish language contains ergative verbs. Their answers are shown in the following chart.

Does the Spanish language have ergative verbs?
28 responses

- Yes.
- No.
- I don't know.

78.6%
7.1%
14.3%
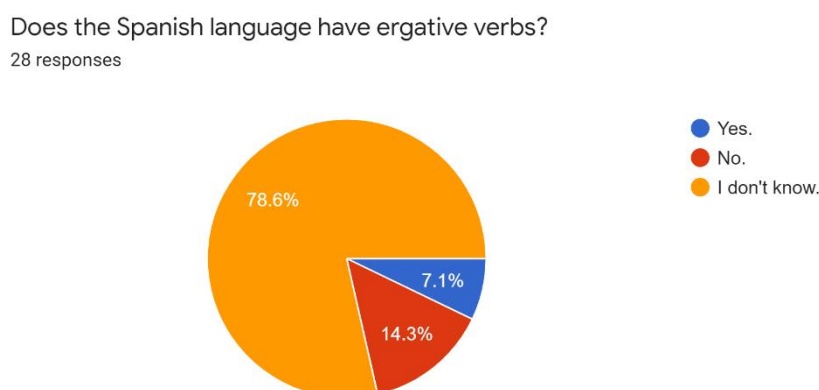
Figure 5: Percentages of the answers to question number 29 from the survey.

Most of the participants do not know the answer. Nonetheless, four of them declare that there are no ergative verbs in Spanish. Opposite, two participants state that the Spanish language contains ergative verbs. However, the fact that ergative verbs are normally called unaccusative in Spanish might confuse the participants.

The last question in the survey was for the participant to provide an example of an ergative verb in Spanish if they think that Spanish contains this type of verbs. Only two

participants answer this question and, once again, they coincide with the provided example. They provide similar examples with the verb 'hervir' ('boil'): 'Yo hiervo agua/ Marina hierve la sopa' ('I boil water'/Marina boils the soup') and 'El agua hierve/La sopa hierve' ('The water boils'/The soup boils'). Their examples show that 'hervir' ('boil') is indeed an ergative verb.

As a result of the survey's outcomes, it can be stated that Spanish students of English have insufficient knowledge on ergative constructions. Contrarily, they know better transitivity and intransitivity in general terms. Nevertheless, they have some inherent knowledge about ergative or unaccusative constructions in Spanish as they accurately translate the provided ergative sentences in English into Spanish.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, ergative verbs are those types of verbs which can be used either transitively or intransitively. The subject of an intransitive ergative construction corresponds semantically to the object of its equivalent transitive ergative construction as both of them perform the semantic role of Patient. However, they are different syntactically speaking since one of them has the syntactic function of subject and the other is functioning as a direct object. Nevertheless, they have a difference, which is the fact that the transitive construction is an agentive construction, while the intransitive construction is non-agentive. In addition, ergative constructions denote causality in spite of the fact that transitive constructions indicate an external causer, while intransitives do not even have an implicit one. This definition of ergative verbs fits in both languages English and Spanish since both languages are nominative-accusative languages. As already mentioned, both languages present a syntactic and semantic relationship between the

object of the transitive sentence and the subject of the intransitive sentence when dealing with ergative verbs.

Moreover, ergative constructions have similar constructions in both languages such as passives. Passives as well as ergatives have a subject playing the role of patient. Nonetheless, passives are agentive constructions, while ergatives are non-agentive constructions (as discussed above). Besides, passive constructions license Agents implicitly or expressed by a prepositional phrase in both languages (English and Spanish).

Nevertheless, there are some differences between English and Spanish when dealing with ergativity. The terminology is slightly different since English deals with ergative verbs opposite to Spanish that deals with unaccusative verbs rather than ergative verbs. Furthermore, the Spanish dictionary does not include the latter term. In contrast, English deals with unaccusative verbs as a subtype of ergative verbs.

Furthermore, ergativity is an unknown aspect of the English and the Spanish grammar taking into account the survey's outcomes. Spanish students of English have knowledge regarding transitivity and intransitivity in general terms, however, they have scarce knowledge concerning ergativity. Additionally, the survey proves that Spanish students of English have a better control of syntax since they all provide the right answers when asked about syntactic functions. Only some experts on the English language (the graduate and undergraduate students of an English degree) show a higher level of knowledge towards ergative constructions in English and Spanish.

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10. Appendices

Figure 1:

Level of proficiency in English (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages):
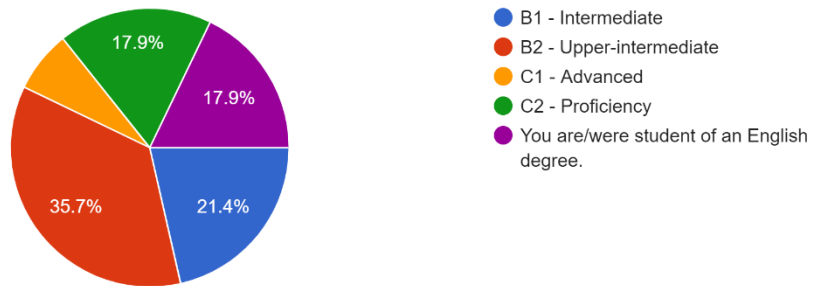
28 responses

- B1 - Intermediate
- B2 - Upper-intermediate
- C1 - Advanced
- C2 - Proficiency
- You are/were student of an English degree.

Figure 2:

Do you know what an ergative verb is?

28 responses

- Yes, I know.
- No, I don't know.
- I'm not sure, but it sounds familiar.
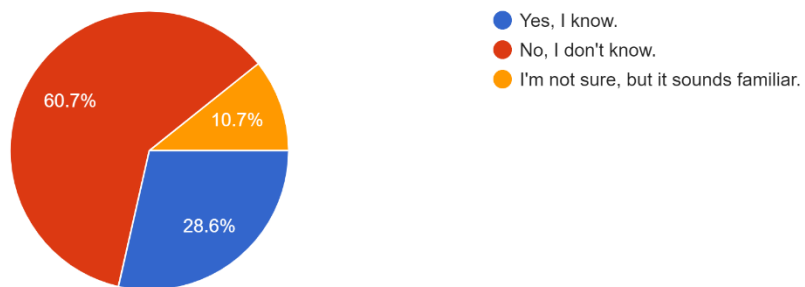
Figure 3:

"James opened the door", this sentence is ...
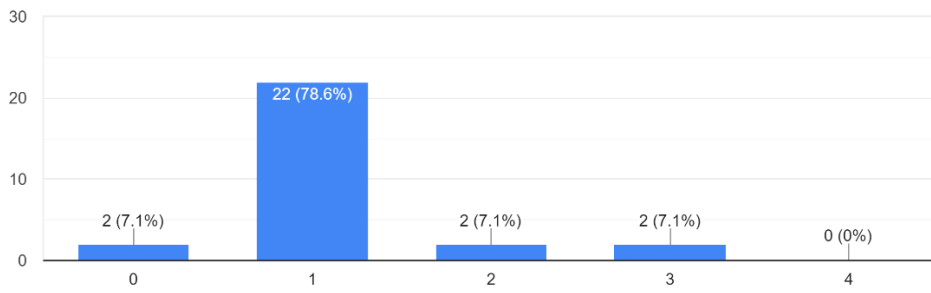
28 responses

Figure 4:

"The door opened", this sentence is ...
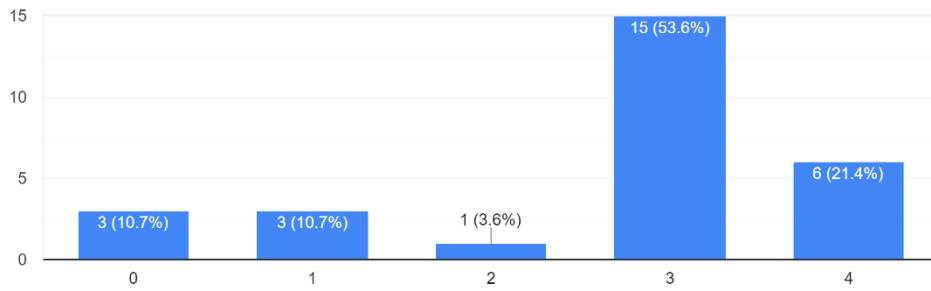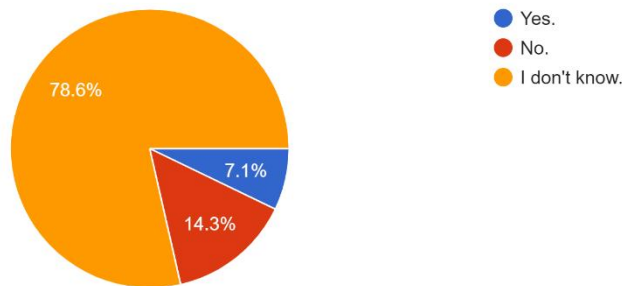
28 responses

Figure 5:

Does the Spanish language have ergative verbs?

28 responses

Survey's sample:

1. Age:

  o 18-23

  o 24-30

  o 30-45

  o 45-60

  o More than 60

2. Place:

3. Native language:

  o Spanish

  o Catalan

4. Level of proficiency in English (according to the Common European Framework of

Reference for Languages):

  o B1 – Intermediate

  o B2 – Upper-intermediate

  o C1 – advanced

  o C2 – proficiency

  o You are/were student of an English degree.

5. Studies:

6. Do you know what a transitive verb is?

  o Yes, I know.

  o No, I don't know.

o   I'm not sure, but it sounds familiar.

7. Do you know what an intransitive verb is?

o   Yes, I know.

o   No, I don't know.

o   I'm not sure, but it sounds familiar.

8. Do you know what is an ergative verb is?

o   Yes, I know.

o   No, I don't know.

o   I'm not sure, but it sounds familiar.

9. If you know what an ergative verb is, could you write the definition or give an example of it?

10. Have you ever had an English lesson about transitive, intransitive and ergative verbs? (If you have had a lesson only about one or two of the three types of verbs, mark the last question and write your answer there).

o   Yes.

o   No.

o   I'm not sure.

o   Other: ………………

11. Have you ever had a Spanish lesson about transitive, intransitive and ergative verbs? (If you have had a lesson only about one or two of the three types of verbs, mark the last question and write your answer there).

o   Yes.

o No.

o I'm not sure.

o Other: ………………

12. "James opened the door", this sentence is ...

0: I don't know 1: transitive 2: somewhat transitive 3 intransitive 4: somewhat intransitive

13. Which is the subject of this sentence: "James opened the door"? (If you can, specify the type of subject):

14. Which is the function of "the door" in this sentence: "James opened the door"?

15. "She reads", this sentence is …

0: I don't know 1: transitive 2: somewhat transitive 3 intransitive 4: somewhat intransitive

16. Which is the subject of this sentence: "She reads"? (If you can, specify the type of subject):

17. "The door opened", this sentence is ...

0: I don't know 1: transitive 2: somewhat transitive 3 intransitive 4: somewhat intransitive

18. Which is the subject of this sentence: "The door opened"? (If you can, specify the type of subject):

19. "She reads him a book", this sentence is ...

0: I don't know 1: transitive 2: somewhat transitive 3 intransitive 4: somewhat intransitive

20. Which is the subject of this sentence: "She reads him a book"? (If you can, specify the type of subject):

21. Which is the function of "him" in this sentence: "She reads him a book"?

22. Which is the function of "a book" in this sentence: "She reads him a book"?

23. Translate this sentence into Spanish: "James opened the door".

24. Translate this sentence into Spanish: "She reads".

25. Translate this sentence into Spanish: "The door opened".

26. Translate this sentence into Spanish: "She reads him a book".

27. Which type of verb is "open"? (If you think that more than one options are correct, mark the last option given and write the answers there).

- o Transitive

- o Intransitive

- o Ergative

- o I don't know

- o Other: ………………

28. Which type of verb is "read"? (If you think that more than one options are correct, mark the last option given and write the answers there).

- o Transitive

- o Intransitive

- o Ergative

- o I don't know

- o Other: ………………

29. Does the Spanish language have ergative verbs?

o   Yes.

o   No.

o   I don't know.

30. If your answer for the previous question was affirmative, could you provide any examples of ergative verbs in Spanish? (Please, provide the verbs but also sentences using those verbs).